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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000124

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SUBJECT: GENERALLY ACCEPTABLE VOTER REGISTRATION

REF: LILONGWE 1202

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Although the Malawi Electoral Commission's (MEC) inadequate preparations led to logistical difficulties during voter registration, we judge the exercise to have been generally acceptable, despite shortages of materials at many registration centers. The MEC has reported that 900,000 new voters registered and 2 million verified their prior registrations during the exercise. Mission observers visited over 200 registration centers in one-fourth of Malawi's parliamentary districts. We generally found registration centers to be well-organized and run by competent staffs, though they lacked forms and film necessary to complete the range of registration activities. Logistical difficulties and known problems with the current voter rolls will have to be addressed by the MEC to ensure that May's polls run smoothly. END SUMMARY.

THE MEC'S NUMBERS

12. (U) At the end of the voter registration exercise (January 5-28), which was twice-extended because of low voter turnout and a lack of materials, the MEC reported that 900,000 new voters registered and 2 million verified their information. In addition, 78,000 deceased voters were removed from the rolls. Commenting on the registration logistics, the MEC acknowledged that many centers did not have adequate replacement voter cards for voters who had lost their cards or enough film to take photos of new voters. The MEC supplied centers with additional forms and film in the latter half of the registration period to deal with most of these complaints. They have also announced that the centers will re-open for one week in April to encourage more voter verifications and new registrations. (NOTE: Voter cards are not required to vote.)

13. (SBU) The MEC has acknowledged to the donor community that there remain some issues with the voter rolls that need to be addressed prior to the election. Although the MEC estimates the total number of legal registered voters to be 5.8 million, the voter rolls currently exceed more than 6 million, and so the MEC plans to "clean up" the rolls in April by removing double registrants and deceased persons and by processing transfers. (COMMENT: Our estimations point to the need for a more involved clean-up. With a population of 11.6 million and a median age of 16.4 years, we roughly calculate that there can be no more than 5.1 million people who could legally register to vote. And with roughly 260,000 people dying per annum in Malawi, the current roll could have as many as 790,000 deceased voters on it, given that the rolls were last cleaned in 2000. END COMMENT.)

WHAT WE OBSERVED

14. (SBU) Over the 23-day period, the Mission sent out observers to over 200 registration centers in 45 parliamentary districts. Reports from US Mission observers -- similar to those of other missions -- indicate that the registration centers were largely well-organized and run by competent staffs. Political parties and local NGOs monitors were in the centers and appeared to understand their role to scrutinize the process.

15. (SBU) Observers did however note the inadequate supply of registration forms and film and the overall low participation of voters. In addition, observers noted frustration amongst registration officials about unclear guidelines and impractical procedures for transferring a voter's registration from one constituency to another. Finding most registration centers in order, US Mission observers judged 4% of the centers visited to have "serious problems" that would likely "affect the overall integrity of the registration process," and the problems were uniformly related to the inadequate supply of materials.

THE LOCAL RESPONSE

16. (U) Midway through the exercise, local NGOs began releasing press statements evaluating the registration exercise. Most of the statements noted the lack of materials, the low voter turnout, and the MEC's slow response to problems at registration centers. A few organizations

also commented on specific incidents related to poorly organized centers or to political party rallies disrupting registration activities. To address these concerns, the MEC extended the original 14-day registration period by 9 days. Some NGOs and political parties have also expressed their concern about the MEC's ability to handle polling day logistics.

17. (U) The donor community (including the US, the UK, the EU, UNDP, Norway, and Germany) also released a press statement on the registration process. The statement included the above mentioned observations and counseled the MEC to intensify its efforts to deal with the registration exercise's shortcomings and to prepare more adequately for polling day.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Recognizing the MEC's logistical difficulties and inadequate preparations for the registration process, we find the overall process to have been generally acceptable. Throughout the process, the MEC made genuine efforts to replenish form and film supplies and to address other concerns as they became apparent. That being said, the MEC still faces the task of cleaning up the voter rolls and improving its performance for the actual polls. Since the vote is a one-day exercise, the MEC will have to ensure an adequate number of ballots and iron out the administrative glitches that dogged registration if it does not want to compromise the polling exercise on May 18.

BROWNING